

CRIMSON SKIES

Outline by Graham Yost
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Act One

1933. In the fabulously ornate dining room of the VAN DUSENS, a dozen of America's wealthiest and most powerful are dining. Rain lashes the windows. By the look of it, we're in a high-rise apartment building in New York or Chicago. The doors of the elevator open and in walks NATHAN ZACHARY, 30s, wealthy shipping magnate and general gadabout -- one of those bon vivants who's only vaguely aware there's a depression going on.

Nathan is a surprise, but very welcome guest. Also there is an old friend of Nathan's, the German-accented WILLI DREYER. They apparently met during the Great War, but Nathan and Willi do not elaborate. Willi is now a General in the Army Air Corps.

Talk at dinner touches on the rise of air piracy. Everyone turns to Willi -- what does he know about these air pirates? Willi says the stories about the "Crimson Ghost" and the "Black Swan" and others in the pulp magazines are mostly fiction. He admits that the authorities (and insurance companies) have suppressed the real stories because they don't want to scare people. He says the real Crimson Ghost and Black Swan aren't the romantic Robin Hoods of the pulps: they're vicious thugs, their real identities unknown (Willi admits to having suspicions about the Ghost's real ID but won't say who he thinks it is). Willi notes that one pirate, known as "The Scar," has been doing horrible deeds in Asia.

Willi says that he is going to set a trap for the Crimson Ghost in a month or so and that will put an end to air piracy in America. As for reports that these pirates have wild and amazing new aircraft, Willi says that the Air Corps has a new plane of their own which will be more than a match for the pirates.

After coffee and cigars in the library, Nathan says he must leave. Host and hostess beg him to stay -- it's bad weather, he won't be safe going home, etc. -- but Nathan insists. He wishes Willi good luck in catching the Crimson Ghost. Someone remarks that maybe Nathan is the Crimson Ghost. This makes Willi laugh so hard he almost chokes.

Nathan thanks his friend for the vote of confidence and heads off down the elevator, stepping out into... the airplane hangar level of the Van Dusen's dirigible - we discover see that these opening scenes have been taking place 5,000 feet in the air. Nathan gets in his little two-seater and flies away.

But instead of flying back to Chicago where he lives, he heads for a cloudbank and disappears. In the cloudbank is an amazing dirigible out-fitted with guns and armor -- the PANDORA.

Nathan lands on the Pandora's flight deck and is met by JACK and the rest of the FORTUNE HUNTERS. Nathan tells them that with the all the jewelry and artwork on-board, the Van Dusen's dirigible will be a big score. He says that now is the time to hit them, before Willi gets his new planes off the ground and sets his trap.

The Pandora swoops in on the Van Dusen dirigible. Nathan wears an aviator's helmet and goggles and a crimson scarf (from which he gets his Crimson Ghost moniker), which cover his face. As they get close, ready to board, a squadron of brand new Air Corps fighters appears out of nowhere and attacks the Pandora. These planes are *fast*.

Nathan realizes that Willi was lying -- his new planes are ready now and this is the trap. Nathan and Jack leap into their planes and fight back.

On the Van Dusen dirigible, Willi is very proud of his new fighters. But then he sees Nathan's planes and his eyes bug out of his head. Willi's planes may be fast, but Nathan's planes are *breathhtaking*.

Nathan and Jack quickly take out the Air Corps fighters (they shoot ropes into the propellers, disabling the planes, letting the pilots parachute to safety).

The Fortune Hunters board the Van Dusen ship, battle Willi's troops and take over. They steal jewelry, artwork and a safe (but not a woman's wedding band - Nathan, we see, has a sentimental side). They head up through the catwalks to the top of the blimp and wait for the Pandora. But before the Pandora can get to them, another dirigible comes in, jet black, armed to the teeth. It's THE BLACK SWAN and she means to take the Van Dusen spoils from Nathan. She slides down a boarding rope and walks up to Nathan.

There's history between Nathan and the Swan and it's not good. Before the Swan can take Nathan's haul, Nathan shoves the safe off the top of the blimp. It drops out of sight. What no one sees at first is that there's a line attached to the safe, rapidly uncoiling. Nathan asks the Swan if she's wearing a parachute. "Of course. Why do you ask?" she says. Nathan points to the line trailing after the plummeting the safe. Too late, the Swan sees that Nathan has attached the other end of the line to her belt. Over she goes, more infuriated than afraid.

Nathan and the Fortune Hunters overpower the Swan's crew. The Pandora scoops up Nathan and crew and off they go... but not before banking down to wave goodbye to the Swan in her parachute. She responds by shooting at them with her pistol. The bullets ping off the Pandora's armor and they fly away.

A month later. Nathan, in his persona as a shipping magnate, is in his fantastic Chicago penthouse. We will learn that Nathan became a shipping tycoon after the war. He maintains that he weathered the Crash of '29 well. The truth is he was wiped out by a series of investments that had been "guaranteed" by his wealthy friends (they, of course, managed to sell in time while investors like Nathan swung in the wind - shades of Enron, 70-plus years ago). Nathan did, however, manage to hold onto one million in cash. He invested that last million with DR. FASSENBinder, a German aviation genius.

Fassenbinder had tried to sell his designs to the Army but they rebuffed him (too fantastic, too improbable). As he wasn't about to give his designs to his native Germany (not with Hitler around), Fassenbinder didn't know what to do. Enter Nathan.

With Fassenbinder's revolutionary planes Nathan quickly established himself in the world of air piracy. Initially his sole targets were his wealthy "friends" who screwed him in '29. But now pretty much anything that flies is fair game. He doesn't like to shoot anyone, but will if he has to. Piracy takes up about a third of his time. The rest of his days are spent in leisure, hobnobbing with the rich and powerful -- and spotting new targets for the Fortune Hunters.

He's in his fabulous Chicago penthouse when SAMANTHA, a stunning woman, shows up. She wants help getting back a priceless family heirloom -- a bronze sculpture. There's a whole story behind it, but basically it's been swindled out of her family's control and is being shipped overseas by zeppelin in a week's time. Nathan wonders why she's come to him. She says there are rumors that Nathan knows people who know people who could help her. Nathan insists he's just a businessman and shows her the door. He tells his men to follow her.

Nathan's men follow Samantha and report back that Samantha isn't who she says she is. Others report that there is indeed a zeppelin leaving for the continent in a week's time as Samantha said, but there's nothing about a sculpture on the manifest. There is, however, some mystery shipment listed under the heading "small courier packet." Nathan is intrigued and tells his men to meet him at "The Hangar."

The Hangar is Nathan's secret underground facility near his country home on Lake Geneva, an hour out of Chicago. He's meeting with his team when an alarm sounds. Samantha is caught trying to sneak in -- it seems she trailed the men who had been trailing her. Nathan is pissed -- now that she knows about their

hangar and who he is they'll have to kill her. Samantha confesses the truth: The story about the prized family sculpture was a lie. But a huge collection of diamonds (the ``small courier packet'') is going to be on that zeppelin. She has the combination to the airship's safe. If they team up they could get a lot of money. Nathan agrees.

The Pandora heads off to intercept the zeppelin. We establish Nathan's luxurious cabin, with his prized collection of fine art. Jack calls him on the intercom - the target zeppelin has left New York. They shadow it, close in, then drop down silently and sneak in from the top. When they get to the safe, Samantha, in one quick move, whips out handcuffs and cuffs Nathan to the safe. Nathan is startled. His bewilderment increases tenfold when through the door comes a tall, handsome man with a scar running chin to ear. Nathan gasps. ``Rutherford?' RUTHERFORD smiles.

Act Two

FLASHBACK. The Great War. The last day of 1917. Nathan is flying for the Army Air Corps and Rutherford for the RAF. The two of them are competing for ``The Shoe'' -- an old dirty boot given as the prize to the man with the most kills for the year. Nathan doesn't much care for Rutherford; Rutherford hates Nathan.

They take off and go looking for Germans. There are none in sight. But then Nathan spots one and goes after him. As he's closing in he sees that the German's guns aren't working. Nathan salutes him and flies off. Only to be attacked by Rutherford.

There's a fierce dogfight. Nathan is shot to pieces and has to bail out. As he's dropping in his chute, Rutherford closes in for the kill. Just then, a German - the one Nathan spared -- flies in and blocks Rutherford's shot. We see the German now -- it's WILLI DREYER.

Rutherford shoots down Willi and looks for Nathan, only to have Nathan parachute into his cockpit. A ferocious fistfight, in and out of the plane. They accidentally rip the undercarriage off on a church steeple. Nathan overpowers Rutherford and takes the controls. But how to land without wheels? He spots a train snaking through the countryside, drops down, matches speed and lands on its roof.

Up ahead is a tunnel. Nathan struggles to get an unconscious Rutherford out of the crashed plane, but can't. At the last second, Nathan jumps clear. The plane wreckage hits the tunnel wall and disintegrates, Rutherford apparently dead.

BACK TO THE PRESENT. Rutherford is not dead. It took him years (and the best surgeons in the world) to recover from his injuries. He moved to Hong Kong and used his family's wealth to

set himself up as the crime lord of the East. He is now the notorious air pirate known as The Scar.

As Rutherford tells his tale we note one of his cronies -- a hunched-over man who wears a mask and walks with a cane. He is MR. CROSS, Rutherford's jester and executioner. People who are sent away with Mr. Cross are never seen again.

Rutherford blames Nathan for the years of painful recovery and the disfiguring scar. But their reunion, he says, is about more than exacting revenge. Wealthy beyond dreams, there is one thing Rutherford still needs -- his own country. He has his eye on the little republic of Korovia. But in order to get it, he will need a military dirigible -- a gunship. He gives Nathan 48 hours to get him a gunship. If he fails, Rutherford -- or, to be more precise, Mr. Cross -- will kill the crew of the Pandora.

Nathan heads off to see his old friend Willi. He asks to be given a tour of one of the Air Corps' newest gunships. Willi takes him to one in a hangar. While onboard, Nathan fires up the engines and starts to take off with it. Willi tries to stop him. Nathan reveals that he is the Crimson Ghost and that Rutherford has returned and is holding his crew hostage. Nathan gets Willi to safety, then flies off at the helm of the gunship.

Meanwhile, Rutherford uses the Pandora to do some dastardly crime. During the crime, Rutherford masquerades as the Crimson Ghost and leaves some evidence behind that implicates Nathan.

Nathan, unaware of this, gets the gunship to Rutherford. Rutherford says that he is a man of his word -- the Pandora's crew will not be killed. They will, however, never again set foot on Earth. They will be his prisoners and slave laborers in the air until they die. He tells Mr. Cross to kill Nathan. Nathan runs, grabs a parachute and dives off the dirigible.

Rutherford sends a plane after Nathan to shoot him out of the air. Nathan drops, but doesn't pull the ripcord. The pilot zooms down after him, waiting for Nathan to pull the cord. Nathan waits, waits, screaming toward the ground. At the last possible second (or a few seconds after) he pulls the cord. The pilot starts to fire, then sees, to his horror, that Nathan drew him into diving too low. Too late to pull up, the plane crashes. Nathan lands hard but survives.

Nathan makes his way to New York. He sees in newspaper headlines that he is a wanted man (blamed for the crime Rutherford did in his name). He stows away on a transatlantic zeppelin. Halfway over the Atlantic, Nathan is discovered by a KID. The kid could turn Nathan in but doesn't -- he's a fan of the Crimson Ghost pulps and doesn't believe the stories now being printed. But then someone else spots Nathan and he is chased. He avoids capture and takes off in a small bi-plane. The zeppelin's

CAPTAIN says Nathan is doomed -- they are a thousand miles from land.

Nathan knows the predicament he's in but keeps flying. Just as the bi-plane runs out of gas, Nathan spots a fishing boat in the choppy seas below. Nathan dives down, stalls the plane right over the boat and drops to the deck. The fishing boat captain gives Nathan fuel but wonders how Nathan's going to use it. Nathan has them head the boat into the 30-knot headwind. He fires up the bi-plane prop and the plane lifts off into the strong wind. Nathan flies off.

Nathan makes his way to the Alps in the bi-plane. He heads up into a dangerous, cloud-shrouded high mountain pass. Suddenly, in the midst of the clouds, on high, rocky crags, gun emplacements start firing at him. Nathan deftly dodges the bullets, anticipating them. He makes it past the guns, grins in relief -- but then there's another battery of guns, which he's not prepared for, and the bi-plane is shredded.

Nathan crashes on a mountaintop, barely escaping with his life, only to be captured by gun-toting RUSSIANS. They look him over, come to a consensus that he should die and are about to toss him off a cliff when a woman's voice says, "No. Let me do it." Nathan turns as the BLACK SWAN steps out of the swirling snows.

Nathan is taken to the Swan's high mountain lair (which, it turns out, used to be Nathan's European hide-out until he lost it to the Swan in a game of backgammon).

Nathan tells the Swan that he needs her help in rescuing the Pandora and his friends. The Swan is not interested -- not for money, not even for the Pandora itself. But when Nathan tells her that Rutherford means to take over Korovia, the Swan's eyes light up. Korovia is her homeland. She will help.

Nathan and the Swan figure out where Rutherford would be staging his takeover of Korovia and head there. Scout planes spot Rutherford's trio of dirigibles (his zeppelin, the Pandora and the U.S. gunship). They watch from a distance, spying until they see Rutherford board the Pandora. Then, under cover of darkness, they glide in silently, their black blimp dropping down out of the night sky.

They sneak aboard the Pandora and find Rutherford alone. Nathan stops him before he can sound an alarm. But then Nathan hears a gun click and turns to find the Swan aiming her pistol at him. Nathan is flabbergasted - why is she doing this? The Swan explains that she hates Korovia. Why does he think she became a pirate? Korovia was horrible to her. She'd gladly help Rutherford take it over. Rutherford smiles. Nathan slumps and is tossed into the brig.

But it's the Pandora's brig, and locking Nathan up in there is like tossing Br'er Rabbit into the briar patch. Nathan knows where the trick panel is that leads to the secret passage that leads to the catwalks and off he goes.

Nathan sneaks around the ship, freeing and arming his old crew. He also plants mysterious packages throughout the ship. Things are going well - until Mr. Cross figures out what's going on and sounds the alarm. Rutherford's henchmen vastly outnumber the Fortune Hunters, and though they battle valiantly, the Fortune Hunters are overwhelmed.

Nathan is brought before Rutherford again. Rutherford says there will be no more delays and tells Mr. Cross to kill Nathan. Nathan says Rutherford might want to rethink that. The mysterious packages he placed throughout the ship were explosives on timers, set to go off in ten minutes. If Rutherford and his men don't get off the Pandora now, Nathan will let the ship blow up. Rutherford thinks he's bluffing and orders Mr. Cross to stop delaying and shoot Nathan now! Mr. Cross draws his gun, aims at Nathan... then shoots Rutherford. Rutherford, incredulous, drops to the deck, dead.

It's like the death of the Wicked Witch of the West -- Rutherford's henchmen are glad he's dead. Nathan quickly sends out his team to disarm all the explosives. He goes to disarm one nearby. Mr. Cross goes with him. Nathan is very appreciative of Mr. Cross's help. But then, as they finish disarming the explosive, Nathan sees something on Mr. Cross -- a ring? a missing finger? a small scar? -- that makes him realize the truth. He grabs Mr. Cross's mask and whips it off, revealing that *Mr. Cross is the real Rutherford!*

Act Three

His face is horribly scarred; his body, horribly crippled. Knowing that no one would respect such a hideous creature, he hired a drunken British actor (later surgically altered) to play the part of "Rutherford" to the world. "Now," says the real Rutherford, "I will have my revenge."

"One problem," says Nathan. "I didn't give the signal." "What signal?" asks Rutherford. "The signal that says I'm back in control of the Pandora." Rutherford doesn't know what Nathan means. Before Nathan can explain, there's the staccato popping of machine-gun fire and the explosion of rockets.

The Black Swan is attacking the Pandora! Now we realize that her duplicity, turning Nathan over to Rutherford, was all part of their plan.

Rutherford and his men make it off the Pandora and back to their zeppelin and gunship, leading to a climactic battle between Rutherford's forces and the Swan and Nathan. Just when Nathan and the Swan think they've won the day, Rutherford calls in his reserves. Five more dirigibles join the fight on Rutherford's side, aided by fifty fighter planes. Now it looks like Nathan and the Swan will be annihilated. But then -- sound the cavalry trumpets -- a fleet of U.S. gunships, commanded by Willi, joins the fray.

At the end of the battle, it comes down to Nathan, barehanded, against Rutherford and his sword-cane, atop a dirigible. It ends when, due to his own maniacal treachery, Rutherford falls from the dirigible, disappearing in a cloud far below.

After the battle, Willi takes back his battered gunship that Nathan stole. He could try to take Nathan and the Swan into custody, but he's not sure he'd win that fight, so he lets them go.

The Swan is now ready to accept the Pandora as payment for her help. Nathan says that was not the agreement. The Swan, furious, says it was! Before the argument can escalate, Nathan pulls some trick on the Swan and flies off, leaving her.

Nathan tells his crew to plot a course for home then heads to his cabin to relax. As he fires up a cigar he frowns. Something's wrong with one of his prized paintings. He looks closer. The painting is gone. It's been replaced by a signed photo of the Swan. He looks around. All his prized paintings have been replaced by signed photos of the Swan. Nathan roars in rage.

On her dirigible, surrounded by her new art collection, the Swan smiles. The two dirigibles sail off into the sunrise.

The End